



## **Visual Perception and Cultural Memory: Typecast and Typecast(e)ing in Malayalam Cinema**

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**T**his paper analyses how collective unconscious memory plays a dominant role in conceiving the subaltern<sup>1</sup> and dalit<sup>2</sup> bodies and its consciousness within the representational strategies followed by mainstream Malayalam cinema.<sup>3</sup> There is a flood of stereotypical images when it comes to the representation of subalterns by the mainstream Indian cinema. Movies that do take up the task of representing the marginalized often end up redeploying the stereotypes: by casting aside the subaltern as ‘uncultured’ and, now, as fundamentalist. Static images of tribals—and the otherness of their communities, rooted in a peculiar notion of the body of the subaltern, have also been reproduced. Popular Indian films often follow two schemas of visual or narrative strategies to redeploy the static image of a social group. The first is through the visible and direct representation of the physiognomy of the character as subaltern (denoted with racial, class and ethnic features), and the second is through the deployment of indirect, and sometimes, invisible social and cultural signifiers which mark the subaltern identity of the character (name, language, occupation, habits and nature, which connotes specific identity of caste or ethnic group). It is in this context that this paper attempts to contextualize one of the south Indian film actors Kalabhavan Mani to analyze how caste identity plays a dominant role in Malayalam cinema, and argue that memories of caste become an integral part of the visual perception of the Malayali spectator. Most of Mani’s films adopt a particular mode of representation that treats his body and his persona as a cultural sign of difference. When compared to other mainstream Malayalam films, the narrative and mise-en-scène in Mani’s films are very distinct in nature. They commonly depict specific visual narrative methods and typecast characters to recreate an imagined but subordinated world of the subaltern, which suits to Mani’s lower caste identity and his dalit persona.

Before entering the cinema, Mani—who was born in a lower caste family in the Thrissur district of Kerala (in Southern India)—was popular in Kerala as a well-established mimicry artist from Kalabhavan (from where he got the prefix ‘Kalabhavan’), a mimic theatre group based in Kochi.<sup>4</sup> He was also quite popular as a successful folksinger. He popularized folksongs that reverberated throughout the Indian musical recording industry, having released a series of very popular and financially successful folk song cassettes (Nadan Pattukal) and seasonal religious songs and Mappila Pattukal (Mappila Songs). Mani made his first appearance in the Malayalam film *Aksharam* (Sibi Malayil, 1995) as an auto driver and in 1996, through the film *Sallaapam* (Sundardas, 1996), he established himself as an actor. Since then, he has acted in several movies as a comedian in which he has been identified by his idiosyncratic laughing style. From 1998 onwards, he shifted towards “serious” roles, playing both heroes and villains. He has acted in nearly 160 films in all four south Indian languages: Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.

Contemporary popular Malayalam cinema uses different visual and narrative techniques to re-establish the preconceived cultural notions of typified subaltern castes through indirect (without mentioning the caste identity of the characters) but certain legitimized signs and norms—such as name, habits, occupation, body, behaviour and occupied spaces. I argue that contemporary popular Malayalam films—whether driven by a “megastar”, “superstar”, or “popular star”<sup>5</sup>—works in a complex manner while dealing with the question of subalternity or marginality, where the difference is articulated not through the exclusion of the marginalized communities but through a careful and strategic politics of inclusion. In this inclusive perspective, the presentation of subaltern histories and their worldviews are integrated into cinematic narratives as subordinate views and as indicators of lower caste identity. This inclusiveness in representation has a historical continuity. In other words, it preserves and reproduces the collective historical consciousness and memory of (particularly about caste, class, gender and exclusion) the spectators, modifies them, and inserts them into the modern technology of cinema. It triggers the memories—both oral and textual—of the collective spectator to

recognize the social identity of the hero or the actor on the screen. In this act of perseverance, cinema functions as a historical tool as well as a pedagogical resource to generalize cultural memory. To overcome this idealized notion of subalternity, a subaltern citizen/hero—Mani—has to necessitate a struggle to justify his role as a protagonist who is capable of leading the particular narrative contents of the cinema. Precisely because of the heroic space of cinema is occupied by the outcaste in the film, “it shatters the stability of the delicate logical constructs around which are organized the discursive hegemonies of caste society” (Srinivas and Kaali 1998, 222).

In this paper, I consider the Malayalam films in which Mani acted during the period from 1995 to 2006. It is in this period that Mani started his career in Malayalam film industry as a comedian and subsequently took numerous roles, as both a comedian and as a serious hero, which established his career as a film actor. These films, though varied in their narratives, often portrayed certain unique features—such as differently-abled, orphan, etc.,—of Mani’s character and these features or onscreen presences were indirectly juxtaposed with his off-screen persona and caste identity as a dalit. There are many ways in which this idea of ‘differently-abled’ is being articulated. In these films, his characters are shown either as physically challenged (limping, blindness, etc.), immature or with idiosyncratic behaviors, having a mental disability, or as a character who often experiences problems resulting from his inferior position or lack of cultural capital. Taking Mani’s cinematic career and films as a case study, I examine how caste has been reformulated within Malayalam cinema. More precisely, the paper theorizes how Mani’s off-screen persona and lower caste ‘markers’ correspond with the characters he performed on-screen. Even though caste indicators are not consciously deployed in his films, they are demonstrated through a careful insertion of culturally validated signifiers and socially practiced markers of caste. These incidental synonyms of caste are deeply rooted in the cultural history of the region and hence, in the perception of the Malayali and Indian viewers. This culturally legitimized perception and interrelated caste consciousness of the viewer is intrinsically enmeshed with the socio-cultural hierarchies, which is based upon the fundamental configuration of caste in India and Kerala.

Caste, as a fundamental aspect of the social and economic structure of Indian society, has its genesis in ancient India and occupies a powerful position in the social and political realms of modern discourse. It is one of the basic forms of social stratification based upon aspects of customary practice, occupation, purity, pollution, hierarchical bond, and so on. Despite debates on whether it was a traditional practice or a colonial invention, caste functions as a discriminative marker on which ideas of cultural superiority and subordination are articulated. Racial prejudice, hierarchical order, pollution, untouchability, humiliation, and caste-based violence are integral parts of this insidious system. The power and reality of caste continues to be a compelling and enduring aspect of Indians' everyday life (Bayly 2002), and it has been described as "the central faultiness of modern India" (Menon 2006, 1) that structures social relations and thus state action (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011). Although caste may not appear to be present as an observable identity within contemporary India, its existence cannot be denied, since it continues to exert power as a consciousness within modern contexts and institutions. This consciousness and subjective experiences of it have produced different affective relations and worldviews among the upper and lower castes. As K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu observe: "the experience of the dominant castes—their authority, visibility, power, economic presence—as well that of the lower castes—their subordination, oppression, invisibility, and economic and political marginalization—is a modern phenomenon" (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011, 11).

Kerala, the southern Indian state, is well known for its developmental achievements in the field of education, health and quality of life (famously known as the Kerala model of development). However, the caste system in Kerala evolved to become one of the most complex and deep-rooted in India. Though practiced differently, the caste hierarchy was quite prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala. As elsewhere, the system legitimized itself through the rhetoric of ritual purity. The caste order was kept in place by sartorial and bodily disciplines. Styles of clothing and of adorning the body, rules of distance and sight pollution, and food habits constituted a set of complex signs for expressing social relations (Parayil 2009, 71). The upper castes maintained

various practices and symbolic regulations in order to differentiate themselves from the lower castes. It is believed that the advent of colonial modernity and related socio-religious reforms in the twentieth century only changed the practice of rigid caste hierarchical system, so that caste practices—as “the subjectively effective identity of a social group”—continues to exist in both conscious or unconscious appropriation of these symbolic practices in the contemporary everyday lives of the Malayali (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011, 10). The contemporary symbolic forms of ‘caste,’ having evolved from various cultural practices, are therefore continuously reproduced in mainstream cinema and cultural representations, and hence in the minds of viewers. In Malayalam cinema, subaltern groups have always carried the burden of imposed identities—as untouchables, socially deprived and culturally marginalized. Their identities are undermined, their everyday life degraded, and everyday misery obscured by these cultural representations (ibid, 13). Subaltern pasts have been devalued and their history hardly accounted for within dominant historical narratives. Nevertheless, in Indian mainstream visual representations, cultural notions of distinct caste identities are articulated through tropes of binary visual signifiers of the upper caste and lower castes, such as civilized/uncivilized, mature/immature, and master/servant.

When looking at Mani’s characters in his early films, one can easily perceive how cultural notions of caste are visually articulated through identifiable signs such as skin colour, name, language, dress, body features, occupation, location, and social behavior. I argue, therefore, that the interrelationship between conditioned perceptions of the viewer and the cinematic representations of caste through various indexical signs on Mani’s public persona, body, and characters become a composite site of his real-life caste identity. Caste, in this context, can be simultaneously made obvious even as it is obscured. However, the familiar depictions of the indexical connotation of caste are conventionalized and are deployed within films in such a way that no particular sign is necessarily about caste even as the total figuration of Mani’s character is type-caste. To understand this paradox between the visible and the obscured, I examine the construction of Mani’s characters and their representations on screen rather than follow a textual analysis of any of these films. Some important questions I wish to raise are:

why is Mani always cast in type-caste roles, and how do these roles communicate with the spectator within the social imaginary of Kerala? Does the cinematic narrative content perpetually construct a space for a subaltern hero within the existing narrative structure of the popular cinema or does it provide an alternative means of raising questions that need to be addressed for viewers? Additionally, one can also problematize issues such as: to whom are these films addressed? How do spectators identify with Mani? When addressing these questions, the paper will show that the visual-narratives of Mani's characters in these films invoke a perception attached to the cultural memories of the spectator that seeks particular ways of seeing Mani's body and persona as a type-caste figure. Therefore, the practice of seeing instantaneously produces binaries in perception through the distinguishable visual signifiers of the elite and the subaltern.

In Mani's films, the heroic narrative is occupied by the subaltern, and more specifically by an identifiable dalit, which is unconventional within the domain of stardom and hence needs to be justified within the films. This necessitated an unusual narrative structure—such as representation of the conventional social category of caste or subaltern pasts through indexical signs and its obscure presence and indirect articulation on the screen—for Mani's films whereby his characters try to overcome the imposed identity to achieve the popular imagination of star. Most of Mani's films are loaded with this tension between the objectified persona of the ideal star and Mani as a star with an embodied subaltern identity. It is at this point that the notion of an imagination of ideal star shared by a community of viewers comes to the forefront. It is at the level of the viewers' cultural memory and consciousness that Mani's heroes have to fight to survive. To put it more clearly, the image of the hero in Malayalam films is firmly rooted in the preference for white skin, manliness, elite traditionalism verging on ideas of 'aristocracy,' and a close affinity to the celebration of feudal memories of the upper castes. It is in this context that I propose to analyze Kalabhavan Mani's films in an attempt to understand how preconceived notions of caste and body play a crucial role in his films, and how the films themselves visually reproduce certain idea of typecasting that cater to the cultural expectations of the Malayali spectators. How do Mani's films re-enact the collective

consciousness of the spectator and in what way is this enactment connected to the unconscious memory of caste? Why does Mani's personas onscreen and off, as well as his body, become objects of this enactment? How can memory be used as a concept to elucidate the visual perception of the spectator? These questions will be interrogated while considering two rather unrelated instances: a recent police case registered against Mani, and a scene from the Tamil movie *Enthiran* (2010), directed by Shankar, which has been dubbed into many Indian languages.

### **The Off- and Onscreen Personas of the Dalit**

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2013, the Kerala Police registered a case against well-known actor Kalabhavan Mani for allegedly intimidating forest officials during a vehicle check at Kannamkuzhi near Athirappally in the Thrissur district of Kerala. The First Information Report (FIR) was filed based on a complaint by two forest officers, and the actor was charged with offences under the following sections of the Indian Penal Code: Sections 332 (voluntarily causing hurt to deter public servant from his/her duty); 294(b) (singing, reciting or uttering obscene songs, ballad or words, in or near any public place); 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation); and 34 (criminal act done by several persons with common intention) (*Times of India*, 2013; *The Indian Express*, 2013). Immediately following the incident, Mani absconded for a week and the police force were dramatically deployed at various locations to arrest him. The entire episode resembled the way in which the police typically hunt for a history-sheeter (a person with a criminal record or series of crime) or a wanted criminal. On Friday, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2013, Mani finally surrendered to the police and got anticipatory bail.

Interestingly, while the issue was unfolding, then Assistant Director General of Police (ADGP, Intelligence) T. P. Sen Kumar admitted in his keynote address at the State Conference of the Police Association that there was a 'class bias' in the police force. As an example, he cited the zeal with which the police were pursuing the case against Mani. He posed the following questions:

Would the police have behaved the same way if it was Mammooty, Mohanlal, Dileep or Jayaram? If it was Mammooty or Mohanlal or Jayaram or Dileep who did the same thing, and not Kalabhavan

Mani, how would you [the police] have responded? Would they have faced the same fate as that of Kalabhavan Mani? (Deccan Chronicle, 2013; The Hindu, 2013).

Through this comparison between Mani and other ‘superstars’ and ‘megastars’ of the Malayalam film industry, the ADGP pointed to the biases present in the police force’s treatment of the case. He made it clear that the state machinery maintained an entrenched class bias based on skin colour and social background. Such a bias has a history of its own and it continues to govern social perceptions and attitudes. The ADGP further pointed out:

What this [the case against Mani] shows is that we still have not changed our colonial mindset of saluting the white man and crushing the black man under the police boots. Kalabhavan Mani has made it to the top from very humble beginnings. It is not about white colour. It is the fawning attitude we have towards the higher classes. While the higher class is saluted, the common man is abused. Such discrimination is found not just in the police department. The malaise seems to pervade the entire government machinery” (Deccan Chronicle, 2013).

The ADGP’s remarks reveal that there is an overwhelming residue of the colonial mindset in all spheres of life. This mindset infiltrates our present consciousness, governs our perceptions based on class, caste and colour, and ultimately forms an attitude of discrimination.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Kalabhavan Mani, he is marked as an actor by difference. He cannot be treated as a star like other stars. His stardom is subjected to perceived social hierarchies and caste signifiers attached to both his social origins and to his body. For instance, when other prominent actors in the industry are called super/mega/popular stars, Mani is “fondly” referred to as *Keralthinte karthuthamuthu* or the Black Pearl of Kerala.

The above-mentioned case shows the way in which both the state and the communities of viewers share a common but dominant cultural perception of Mani, wherein his body becomes a cultural artifact. This instance also demonstrates how caste works in the public domain and how his personality and body are constantly recognized by an imposed social identity. At this point, I wish to turn to the second instance, in order to

show how these preconceived social markers of subaltern are reworked in a visual form.

In one of the scenes from the science fiction film *Enthiran (Robot, 2010)*—starring Rajnikanth and Aishwarya Rai—the hero and the heroine have an encounter with a subaltern character, enacted by Mani. The scene shows that after a quarrel with the hero, the annoyed heroine walks towards a toddy-tapper who appears with his traditional occupational tools and attire. The heroine then seeks his friendly company just to mock the hero; the naughty toddy-tapper eventually becomes aggressive and prevents her from leaving. Finally, after a minor scuffle with him, both the hero and the heroine manage to run away from the wicked toddy-tapper. Interestingly, this particular scene adopts a ‘documentary’ aesthetic to show an identifiably lower caste and racially coded man with a conventionally ‘lower caste’ occupation. This scene stands out from the other parts of the film following formal conventions of mainstream fiction films, which works within the imaginary of science fiction techno-thriller. The realistic appearance of the subaltern is idealized through multiple visual cues, which coalesce around the body, language, occupation, and aesthetics. In *Enthiran*, it is the encoded cultural semiotics of the body that produces meaning within the visual economy of the narrative. Mani (as Pachaimuthu) plays the mischievous, villainous, and half-naked character of the subaltern toddy-tapper<sup>7</sup>, importantly echoing the very similar role of the mischievous toddy-tapper Rajappan in his second film *Sallapam*. Directed by Sundardas, *Sallapam* helped Mani establish his career in the Malayalam film industry. Mani appears in this comedic role as a toddy-tapper who behaves like a simpleton. He consistently pokes fun at the heroine with his ridiculous actions and parodic songs, however his character always keeps a fearful distance from the other protagonists. In a recent interview when asked “you established your career [...] on the top of the coconut tree, as toddy-tapper, where do you locate yourself now?” Mani replied: “I am still sitting on the top of the coconut tree, unable to climb down”.<sup>8</sup> His positioning as an actor is clear and well defined according to the prevailing imaginary relations of stardom, whereby as an actor, he still occupies a confined position because of the historically attributed caste markedness on his body, and hence, is unable to move away from the typecast roles.

*Enthiran*, however, signifies a transformation in his position within the space of the celluloid: in this film, there is a sense of proximity that he shares with the other protagonists in the screen space, his character is portrayed as too aggressive. This, on the one hand, clearly indicates his position in the south Indian film industry as an established actor who is capable to perform any mischievous and rough villainous roles. On the other hand, both *Sallapam* and *Enthiran* offer a common stereotype of the subaltern as passive, docile, and fearful yet antagonistic when faced with a problem. However, *Sallapam* also clearly shows the confined space that embodies the historically habituated rules of social spaces (fig. 1). This distribution of space presupposes the privileged sense of perception of the Malayali spectator, who can observe Mani's body only within the hierarchical social order of the society.



Fig. 1: Mani as Rajappan in *Sallapam*.

In both films, Mani's body, name, behavior, and occupation become markers of his social position, which is overdetermined by his caste. Cinema, therefore, reproduces some of these classifications based on racial and physiognomic features, class-based occupation, and ritual performances documented and fueled by colonial anthropology's historical attempts to map and categorize Indian castes. They similarly function as markers to identify both the elite and lower class subaltern groups (Parayil 2009). Mani has been similarly typecasted in other films that address a stigmatized caste identity as something inseparably attached to the subaltern's social position, attitudes, and habits.<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, these films portray his body as a site to reproduce caste stigmatization. His body is therefore assembled into a single unit that carries cultural expectations of lower caste people and subalternity held by typical Malayalam viewers, so that his characters, as a result, are never able to overcome this imposed identity.

Mani's off-screen persona is thus conflated with his onscreen characters in these popular films, forcing the subaltern/dalit actor to play a subaltern/dalit character.

In the visual economy of consumption, his body is cast as an inappropriate presence that maintains an unequal relationship with his co-stars: he is often portrayed as unsuitable to share the same onscreen space with other stars. For instance, in films such as *Valiyettan* (2000), *Aaram Thamburan* (1997), and *Narasimham* (2000)—films largely portraying feudal nostalgia in the characterization of the hero and his world—Mani is featured only in supporting and subservient roles. In the first, 'megastar' Mammooty plays the hero, while 'superstar' Mohanlal has the leading roles in the latter two. In all three films, Mani's characters contrast strongly with the sophisticated and aristocratic heroes and his characters remain dependent upon the upper caste heroes. The entire visual narratives are arranged according to the logic of this hierarchical social relation and dialectical worldviews. In *Aaram Thamburan*, for instance, Mani's character Bharathan is a close friend and follower of the hero, Induchoodan (Mohanlal), who flaunts feudal values and habits. However, Mani's character in the film not only belongs to lower class/caste order but also is shown in a morally and physically submissive position compared to the hero. It is through the help of the hero's masculine power and intellect that Mani's character is able to move away from his degraded social position and to achieve a better social status. The dialectical distinction is further substantiated through the visual cues and narrative plots of cultured and uncultured worlds of the hero and his comedian friend (Mani-Bharathan).

It is clear that there are power relations operating within the films' representations. However, it is important to note that these dialectical binaries of social relations are also a significant visual component of the perception of the viewer. Visual perception, or the practice of seeing, can be defined as a socially and culturally conditioned or discursively determined form of visibility, in which the viewer's perception of cultural norms and representational practices, and their familiarity become significant (see Foster, 1988, ix). In the case of Mani's films, it is the specific visual narrative forms, bodily indexes and their indicative correspondence with normative subaltern past and dalit identity that

function as powerful tools to generate a distinct perception in watching his films. These specific visual signifiers and narrative spaces for Mani and his body in the films are explicitly creating a binary in visual perception, which is influenced by caste and subaltern experiences and also discursively determined. The visual perception of the spectator here is conditioned and therefore, fragmented and unequal; it proceeds through the dialectics of binaries, in which unconscious memories of the past and habituated perception of caste plays a prominent role. This binary in visual perception is conditioned by spectators' historical sensibilities, their ideas of touch, and 'moral relativism' (see Guru, 2009). Especially, Kerala society had historical experiences of untouchability based on caste hierarchy, and its notions of distance pollution, bodily touch and sight. It is at this point that I would like to discuss how spectator's perception is combined with the unconscious memories of the past when watching films.

As I mentioned above, Mani's films are replete with dialectical signs of subaltern/lower caste and elite/upper caste mentalities, and it is spectators' memory that helps to identify those discrete signs on the screen. In everyday life, caste does not function according to the normative forms, instead it is through practice and experience that conventions of caste and its norms are circulated in society. The historical experience and practice of caste are integral to social memory, which is neither static nor contextually specific but rather amendable and retold. These subjective memories, which are not necessarily constituted through a person's lived experience, are significant tropes within the domain of visual perception to recognize the caste signifiers and binaries on screen. In other words, the practice of seeing invokes the 'prosthetic memory' of the spectator, where 'embodied gaze,' persistent social division and cultural practices become a pre-text to the film. Embodied gaze here refers to the specific practice of seeing (*darshan* of religious deity) in which the vision is bound with forms of semi-religious perceptions, wherein the reciprocal relation between the gazes—who is seeing and who is seen—are important to understand the dominant practices of visuality (Pinney 2004). Prosthetic memories, according to Alison Landsberg, do not come from a person's lived experience but can activate a sense of familiarity with the narrative event without a person's direct experience with the event.<sup>10</sup> The spontaneous

reactivation of the prosthetic memory of a spectator is attached to the textures of existing cultural and historical practices of the collective public—either experienced or non-experienced. Prominent historical events, sensory experiences, and feelings are also part of this process of constituting prosthetic memory. Here, memory connects with the past: “memory is of the past; memory is about the past” (See Ricoeur, 2004, 15; cited in McNeill, 2010, 20). The practices of seeing (perception) and image-making, therefore, are imbued with the signifiers of the cultural memory: “The body of cinema is potentially a part of the cultural memory of even very recent generations of spectators” (McNeill, 2010, 3). Moreover, within the ‘twilight zone’ of history and memory, the spectator’s memory merges with the practiced or familiar history of the society. Eric Hobsbawn writes about this twilight zone between history and memory. According to him, this zone is a “no-man’s land where individual memory extends through family traditions into the relatively dispassionate, public sphere of history” (Hobsbawn, quoted in McNeill, 2010, 3). It is this familiar history and memory that help the spectator decode the distinct signs of caste on screen. In other words, the viewer’s visual perception is largely ingrained with historical consciousness, which includes social norms, customs and popular representational practices. In particular, while watching a film, it is the collective unconscious memories of the past, the caste marked social distinctions and the familiar representational schema that come into play in identifying the connoted social signifier of the character.

### **Comedian: Subaltern Laughter**

The films in which Mani acted—either as comedian, villain, or hero—show that he is an actor with a difference; an actor who lacks the ‘ideal’ qualities of a star figure. Hence, in films, his body and characters are portrayed differently. He is recognized as a star but not quite popular or mainstream like other stars in the Malayalam film Industry.<sup>11</sup> In the process of simultaneous recognition and enunciation of difference, Mani as the subaltern subject becomes an object of laughter. The historically rooted caste markedness on his body and its difference, and submissive comedy gestures function as objects of laughter. In other words, within the domain of caste binaries, the subaltern presence, their inabilities, inhibitions, spontaneous acts, ignorance, language, tastes

and behaviors always prompt humor and laughter. Mani was an artist of repute in the field of mimicry before he set out to try his fortune in the film industry. Noticeably, in the early stage of his career, it was his skill with mimicry and folk songs along with his distinctive bodily movements and mode of speaking that earned him a distinct identity as a film star.<sup>12</sup> In mimicry, his 'drunken act' had been a phenomenal success. In many of his early movies, such as *Bhoothakkannadi* (1997) and *One Man Show* (2001) he was repeatedly cast as a lower caste drunkard or as the hero's self-mocking sidekick, as in *Aaram Thampuran* (1997), *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998), *Oru Maravthoor Kanavu* (1998), *Mr. Butler* (2000), and *Narasimham* (2000).

Cinematic visual mechanisms and narratives have always showcased Mani's character and his body as markers of a subaltern—dalit—identity. Some of the earlier films need to be mentioned in this context. The distinct aspect of these films, other than Mani's usual typecasting as a lower caste character, is that all these roles are physically, mentally or emotionally disabled in some way or another (fig. 2). These roles of disabled comedians or heroes and their incapability, foolishness, self-mockery and otherness are some elements of comedy that function in the films. He was cast in a variety of roles such as a stray dog catcher (*Aakashathile Paravakal* [2001]); a mentally challenged and illegitimate son of an upper caste Nambudiri woman and a low caste man (*Karumadikkuttan* [2001]); the blind Ramu who falls in love with a deaf and dumb girl (*Vasanthiyum, Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum* [1999]); an adivasi (tribe), who lands in a non-adivasi small town (*Bamboo Boys* [2002]); a mad blacksmith (*Valkkannadi* [2002]); a bear in a zoo (*My Dear Karadi* [1999]); an auto driver-turned IAS officer who faces problems in his life because of his lower class origin (*Lokanaathan IAS* [2005]); a potter, who is an outcast from his village, but lives in another village where he is helping the villagers by doing all kinds of manual jobs (*Kanninum Kannadikum* [2004]); and a dalit police officer (*Kerala Police* [2007]). Even when he is cast as an upper caste character, his characters cannot come out of his entailed identity constructed through his peculiar body language and skin colour. One reason for this is that his personified figure is well-identifiable with that of an outcast, thereby going along with the popular imagination of the community of viewers. A close observation of his characters would reveal that they

do not overcome the social isolation that is endemic to subalternity as well as to isolation. In the film *Narasimham* (2000), he is cast as a differently-abled Nambudiri who does not follow the traditional rituals and is therefore cast aside by others. Mani's role as Appukkuttan Nair in the film *The Guard* (2001) constructs a social world in a jungle far removed from society, where he encounters wilderness and wild animals. In this film too, the character is immune to poverty and other problems and is accompanied by his singing of folksongs, which affirms his subalternity.

There are many narrative plots and visual components that have the potential to reproduce Mani's subaltern positioning within the visual economy of south Indian cinema. Comedy through ridicule of his body and social background is one such generic components. Mimicry, folksongs, and drunkenness are inextricably associated with this early image of Mani as a common man belonging to the lower caste. Physically challenged or differently-abled situations are also part of this narrative content to show his inability or inferior position. These visual cues are particular to cinema and add up with various caste-inflected conventions. In short, he is low-caste, differently-abled and comical, and thus structurally/narratologically located as subordinate to the hero and to the diegetic world.



Fig. 2: Mani as the blind Ramu in *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum*.

Compared with other heroes in the film industry, Mani's characters embody a cultural 'otherness' that contrasts with, and at the same time complements, the leading hero and his world. This otherness, which is conceived as a series of lacks—of height, skin colour, beauty and wisdom—is conveyed through his humorous acts and self-mockery

(Rowena, 2004; Sanjeev and Venkiteshwaran, 2002). These lacks—as comedy—are overtly referenced in almost all his films, through either the scornful remarks by the elite hero or heroine or through Mani's own 'self-reflexive' mockery. Either way, they leave social marks of a distinct ethnic category on Mani's body. Most of these films may not directly reveal his caste or even that of the other heroes/heroines but it would be communicated through serious visual vocabularies and normative cultural idioms, which are part and parcel of the cultural memory of the region. The spectators could recognize these mediated social signifiers as a cultural mark of discrete communities. The visual synonyms or the aesthetic deliverance of Mani's body and persona is equated with the dark-skinned, the immature, the mentally or physically challenged, the dirty and the ugly, the unhygienic and the inferior ranked. In other words, he carries all the grounded signifiers of historical wounds that the lower caste community has suffered (see Geetha 2009; Rodrigues 2009).

This phenomenon, as an unequal balance of power, runs throughout almost all films, supplementing the star's heroism. S. V. Srinivas points out that "[t]he spectator's recognition of the figure on the screen as someone who has a history of providing pleasure, and of course resolving story level problems, was an adequate justification for the manner in which the star was presented as an unquestionable authority figure" (Srinivas 2006). Considering this, the relationship between many of these heroes and Mani is represented through a series of unequal binaries: dominant/subordinate, powerful/powerless or even master/servant. This binary logic is explicitly revealed in *Aaram Thamburan* (1997), *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998), *Valiyettan* (2000), *Narasimham* (2000), and *Natturajavu* (2004) in which Mani once again held supporting roles. Although such binaries may be rationalized by saying that it is a conventional narrative structure of cinema to distinguish and project the power of hero from that of supporting actor or comedian, Mani's idiosyncratic and submissive characters in these films often go beyond these narrative conventions. Instead, these roles allude to facets of social and caste hierarchy through the deployment of derogative remarks, bodily violence, servitude posture, and the characters' unquestionable faith towards heroes (as a friend or master). These binaries also encompass certain historically entrenched

collective memories of the spectator, where a subaltern's or a dalit's position is reinforced as a subordinate one, so that the subaltern cannot exercise political or social power. In these films, even if Mani's characters evoke or imitate positions of power, it is ultimately presented as an act of immaturity or as a laughable act of an innocent comedian.

These comedies typically employ a series of allusions to caste and race, and adopt a particularly scornful attitude towards the physiognomy and personal habits of the comedian.<sup>13</sup> In cinema's narration and representational strategies, it is the 'history' that has become a useful commodity to be 'fixed' and to satisfy the desire of the consumer/spectator (Sobchack, 1996, 6). Mani and his films become the victims of this conceived 'history' of the collective consciousness of the spectatorship. This historical consciousness and its perception demands a confined location for Mani's type-caste figure that can only imagine him in a space, which is culturally attributed to him and his people. In other words, the representation of Mani and the narratives in which he stars have always been intertwined with an invisible residue of the 'past'.<sup>14</sup> This asymmetry between the inserted past and the present prevents Mani from breaking any existing forms of dominant visuality and its forms, resulting in his role remaining subordinate and always bearing the 'marks of an inherent subalternity.'

It is in this context that we can say that Mani's films seem to belong to the genre of 'mass film' and that Mani becomes a 'class hero.' This distinction between mass film and class hero is a complex one. As S. V. Srinivas reminds us in his study of Telugu films, the insertion of the past into the narrative is "a definite sign that the film will rapidly re-establish the connection with the conventions of the mass film" (Srinivas 2006). On the other hand, a 'class hero,' according to Madhava Prasad, is a representation of the hero who embodies cultural and economic signifiers.<sup>15</sup> Even though most of Mani's films are popularly received, it is because of this inherent historical baggage and the floating signifiers of caste associated with his off-screen and onscreen personas that his films are treated as class-grade films. Although Mani became a class-grade film actor and his stardom relates to the popularity of class-grade films, his films do not

necessarily belong to mainstream Indian cinema in the way films of south Indian stars such as N T Rama Rao, Chiranjeevi, Rajanikanth, Mammooty, and Mohanlal do.

It is important here to understand why such class label is always attached to Mani's films considering the fact that these films are as popular as other superstar films of the Malayalam film industry. This opens up a complex domain of perceptual difference in watching, or conceiving films, where the idea of 'popular' and 'mainstream' is largely complemented through the socially legitimized persona of star rather than acting caliber of star or form of the film. The popular perception of the star or the socially legitimized image of a star persona is always equated with an idea that a star whose personified qualities and nature is either attached to upper class or upper-middle class mentalities. The narrative contents of their films and visuals often resonate with the values and norms of such class culture. In this domain, Mani's body—his off and onscreen persona—indeed stands out from the legitimized imagination of a star figure. However, his films are recognized but conceived differently; as an actor with different abilities. It must be noted here that films such as *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* (1999), *Karumadikkuttan* (2001), *Valkannadi* (2002) and *Ben Johnson* (2005) are popular and box-office hits (blockbuster). Though these films are popularly acclaimed, the general perception about these films is that they are 'substandard' when compared to popular films performed by super stars. When Mani's film and a super star's film are broadcasted, family viewers prefer to watch the super stars' film. According to their perception, the narrative contents and forms of Mani's films are repetitive, unsophisticated, unusual, filled with vulgarity, violence, and a melodramatic performance by the actor. For instance, the first three films mentioned above more or less share a common narrative content. In *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum*, he is a visually challenged (Ramu) who lives with his bedridden father, mother and unmarried sister. His lover is a dumb girl. He looks after his family by singing on the roadsides and streets. As the movie progresses, the villain and his friend rape Ramu's sister and lover. The film ends with Mani's extraordinary performance while taking up his revenge against the villain. The film brings laughter and tears while detailing his lower class surroundings and his helpless position when the violent attacks took place

against him and his loved ones. In *Karumadikkuttan* and *Valkannadi*, his characters are mentally challenged and follow the similar narrative style pursued in *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum*. However, most popular films of superstar—Mammootty and Mohanlal—are repetitive both in terms of form and content. Therefore, if the forms, contents and box-office success are markers of popularity, then Mani's films should also belong to the domain of popular-mainstream cinema. But there are social indicators in the cinema shared by the community of spectator, which differentiate Mani's films from other popular films. It is obvious that Mani's films are different and distinct because, as I mentioned earlier, the heroic position is occupied by a star whose persona and body is too unconventional to match up with the ideal star persona.

In the postcolonial condition, the articulation of subaltern identity and the ways in which it negotiates with the public are contingent and contextual, rather than unique and homogenous. The social spaces of the subaltern citizens are unequally dispersed, marginalized, and made invisible.<sup>16</sup> Popular visual culture offers—through shared visual vocabularies—a politics of representation either as a necessary identity for domination, or as a resistance against the inherent identity and subordination on the basis of caste, class or gender.<sup>17</sup> In the next section of the paper, I would like to examine how cinema as a popular medium provides spaces to practice, negotiate, and resist the conventions of caste, and how the visual synonyms and narrative techniques demonstrate such practices.

### **The Making of a Subaltern Star: Sympathy, Humiliation and De-masculinization**

When we compare Mani's characters with that of other prominent stars in the south Indian film industry, Mani's hero, unlike other stars, is not in a position to engage in a dialogue—either moral or political—with society. For instance, as Madhava Prasad observes, superstars and megastars like Rajnikanth, Chiranjeevi, Mohanlal, and Mammootty make moral and political judgments in their films, and their characters bear the collective political and moral consciousness of the people (Prasad, 2009, 69). Indeed, the matter is not linked to the caste or community identity of the hero but to the spectator's identification with a popular hero or star. The consumption of the hero

coincides with the multifaceted charisma and the notion of an 'ideal star.' This ideal star can sometimes act as a person with transcendental and superhuman qualities and encounter real and imaginary situations (Prasad, 1998, 134; Srinivas, 2013, 232). It is the specific narratology of films as well as the spectator's identification with hero/star as a superhuman and charismatic individual that allows the hero to engage with society's political and moral consciousness. There are certain qualitative signs—such as glamour and masculinity—that have to be met by a star persona. However, Mani's hero always shows a lack of these qualitative signs, both physically and mentally. This is because Mani's persona as a star does not concur with the imaginary recognition of an ideal star by the spectator. Moreover, his persona and his cultural capital have been used to satisfy the community of viewers who, by identifying with Mani's figure, acts as a subject within the social relation of power. Instead of helping to collapse conservative morals and age-old traditions, the cinema hall enables the viewing public to engage with certain perspectives outside the ones they may hold in their everyday lives.<sup>18</sup>

The distance that Mani has to traverse to reach the level of other heroes in Malayalam cinema is complex. Firstly, he has to fight against cultural representations of the ethnographically categorized subaltern body, which is deeply entrenched in the practice of seeing and proliferated by forms of knowledge and image-making technologies. Secondly, he has to continuously negotiate with the public for his social space within the conceived boundaries of the dominant visual perception, which is determined by historically evolved structures of caste and social domination. While other Malayalam heroes would easily be cast in a number of roles across caste spectrum, Mani's hero, apart from having the additional burden of a differently-abled mind and body, typically must journey through an uncharted territory marred by several formidable hurdles. He has to enter into a dialogue with the social environment of the embodied gaze of the spectator that determines and defines the standardized bodily movement, the expected expressions of *natanam*, *bhavam*, and *rasam*, and the visual conventions that govern them. The embodied gaze functions according to the logic of hegemonic visual perception and the existing rules of social space. Rather than disrupting them—because

the sense of space is not empty, homogenous, or infinite—it corresponds to the presumption of a bounded, known universe (Rajagopal, 2011, 15).

Mani's heroes, however, try to overcome this particular type-caste visual construction and embodied gaze that is rooted in the dynamics of colonial ethnographic identity of caste and tribe in India (see Pinney, 1990). The body language and gestures of Mani is used as an indirect marker to reproduce this type-caste identity, which, on the other hand, recalls symbolic customary practices that prevailed in the hierarchical power relations of Kerala society. It is through the postures and gestures, and particular clothing arrangements (forms of non-verbal communication), that traditional relationships—of obedience and subordination—of lower caste or subaltern classes to the larger society are expressed. The body, mud, cow dung, paddy fields, folk tunes, derision, so-called 'dirty' jobs, and mimicry get blurred here in Mani's films, as an indispensable item in the cultural landscape and environment or social space of the subaltern. These objectifiable items of subaltern are the common elements in the visual-narratology of Mani's films. In his films, Mani's characters engage in several kinds of occupations traditionally held by lower castes, so that he frequently plays a shepherd, blacksmith, or toddy-taper. It is a process in which a mutual interplay between selective social semiotics and specific cultural environments attribute the visual form of the subaltern identity to Mani.

For instance, *Karumadikkuttan* plays with representations of the dalit while validating cultural stereotypes rooted in the cultural memory of the spectator. In this film, Mani plays the leading role as a mentally challenged—Karumadi (literally meaning 'black')—who is the son of a low caste man and an upper caste Brahmin woman. Although Karumadi is born into the upper echelon of the caste hierarchy, his conduct, eating habits, and behaviour betray his lower caste, dalit-paternity. Accordingly, the film is replete with references to the notions of purity and pollution. The social environments with which Karumadi engages best exemplify this. Mani's character is envisaged as a specific hero with numerous peculiar inabilities and immaturities which is quite different from the usual imagination of an ideal hero. In the film, the hero's experiences with love

and dejection make the viewer sympathetic to him. His helpless fatal cry during fights also earns him the empathy of the viewer. There is, additionally, a moment in which Mani's character of the subaltern hero is elevated to the status of the ideal hero image of the Malayali viewers. This happens when the masculine power of the hero is revealed with the help of the upper caste heroine. Although initially the heroine rejects Karumadi's love, he ultimately wins her by extending shelter to her and her mother when they are evicted from their home. Ultimately, the plot of the film presents Karumadi's manliness to satisfy the spectator's imagination of an ideal hero.

The ambivalent narrative strategy in *Karumadikkuttan* proves to be the dominant one in most of Mani's films, wherein his subaltern identity and various physical or social handicaps are portrayed as an innocent ability to do many good things. Mainstream Indian cinema subordinates the lower caste's world-views and reduces their spatial mobility through a mechanism of representation of disabled bodies and immature selves. Recognition of difference is articulated but not through a respectable manner, and it is also bound up with the spectator's 'recognition' of the potentiality of a 'historical actor' who bears the type-caste ethnographic signs. Mani, therefore, has to embody expectations held by the 'historical spectator.'<sup>19</sup> Compared to other heroes in Malayalam cinema such as Mammooty and Mohanlal—who are portrayed as bearers of middle class fantasies and feudal romances that become part of dominant visual culture—Mani's heroes are always social outcasts who inhabit subordinate visual spaces in order to satisfy the historical spectator's desire to recognize difference.

Mani's heroes usually experiences three phases during the course of a film: sympathy, humiliation, and finally achieving a sense of masculine identity or power with the help of others. Most of his films include a situation to incur sympathy for Mani's hero, gained through a display of his differently-enabled condition or through his character's torture and pain. The logic of sympathy is a necessary narrative and a visual strategy that accommodates his bare body and personified figure to fulfill the conceptual scheme of popular viewing practices of Kerala society. He has to prove his inability in all spheres, thus reinforcing his differences for the spectator's visual pleasure. Hence, Mani's

fictional characters always carry the historical and cultural baggage of the conditioned reality. Neither his characters nor his body are able to move away from this culturally conditioned norm that in order for Mani's character—always marked as different—to access the privileged position of society, he must always be passive and his success mediated by others. Thus the subaltern's or dalit's autonomy is not fully rejected, but can be conditionally negotiated.

The second component is the way in which Mani's body has been used in these films. A series of violence, torture, and humiliation towards his body is yet another significant plot that reinstates the subaltern helpless/subordinate situations, in which others can exercise an authoritative power over the body—the bare life—of a subaltern class. Mani's characters as Ramu in *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* (1999), Bharathan in *Narasimham* (2000), Karumadi in *Karumadikkuttan* (2001), Udumbu Vasu in *Akashathile Paravakal* (2001) and Appunni in *Valkannadi* (2002) variously illustrate the point that his corporeal presence belongs within the sphere of subaltern pasts, whereby he has no sovereign power on his own body, is obliged to do mediocre and dirty jobs, and occupy docile and helpless positions when people ridicule and attack him. In these, as well as in many other films, his subaltern subjectivity is further enunciated through his disabled body, either physically or mentally challenged. At the same time, they function as a narrative strategy that seeks a sympathetic consent from the spectators to accept, justify and approve Mani's heroic position as an ideal hero, but a differently endowed one. The enactment of endless violence—verbal and visual—to humiliate his presence may be yet another cinematic plot, but it signifies a historically conditioned consciousness in which the untouchables have no right to protect their body. Their corporeal presence is subjected to excessive authoritarian power exercised by the superior, and their bodies have been treated as dirt, inferior, decomposed and ugly (fig. 3). For instance, in *Karumadikkuttan*, there is a violent sequence in which the villains strip Mani's clothes off and make him visibly naked while continuing their violent and brutal beating and inflicting humiliation on Mani's body. Mani's character, portrayed as mentally challenged and innocent, takes all these brutality and humiliation without any resistance except for the fatal cry. Through these extensive sequences of

humiliation and series of violence exercised by others, Mani's hero obtains the sympathetic support of the spectator and this ploy of sympathetic narrative structure helps to quench the psychological morals of the spectators. These morals are an outcome of a certain historical consciousness in which Mani's body—dalit and previously untouched—and his heroisms are compared with the dominant visual modes which are, on the other hand, replete with multiple logics of high class symbols, signifiers and aesthetics. Therefore, Mani's hero always has to do immature things and be open to internalize any form of violence and accusation in order to obtain and justify his heroic position in the film. In several films, there are many derogative terms that have been used to refer to his lower caste body, inferior attitude, and lower caste origin. Visually, all these signifiers and their actualizations in the films produce a distinct counter-aesthetic form for Mani's film, and thereby, fall under the label of class films.



Fig. 3: Scenes from *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu*.

The third convention supplements the second one in the way in which subaltern 'de-masculinity' is articulated. The process of de-masculinized subjectivity is justified through the hero's mentally or physically challenged conditions, in which he is unable to resist powerful attacks. This de-masculinity is further foregrounded as his inability to defend the heroines from being molested and raped by the antiheroes (Pandian 1989, 64). However, towards the end of all his films, Mani's characters overcome this de-masculinized position and "acquire" masculinity with the help of the heroines or other patronizing agencies in the films. This social elevation and reinforcement of masculinity through heterosexual romance implies the way in which mainstream films typically depicts masculinity. While dealing with the question of sexual politics or gender binaries, Mani's films are not exceptional but follow the same narrative structure of popular mainstream films, whereby the masculine power and patriarchal authority of the

hero/star is always asserted through the feminization of the female characters and heroines in these films. In Mani's films, the process of the idealization of femininity of the heroines is complicated and is mostly mediated through sexual assault/rape/humiliation of the heroine by the villain, or manifested through the continuous oppression by social and moral institutions or by the miserable economic situation of the heroines. Nevertheless, the films don't question sexual politics or gender binaries, but use them—as a narrative strategy—to reinforce Mani's heroes' masculinity in order to make a balance between the type-caste hero and an identifiable fair-skinned upper caste heroine. It is through the above-mentioned triadic form in visual narratives that Mani negotiates his presence in mainstream popular films as well as within the conditioned popular visual perception of the spectator.

## **Conclusion**

Representations of ethnographic images of the subaltern are never produced in a social vacuum, but rather in a web of social imaginary, which perpetuates the visual formation of the image in cinema. The ethnicity, body, and language of the actor are conceived according to expectations of social subjectivities. Thus, images are formed within this social discourse in which the notion of dominance and subordination are crucial visual sensibilities that foreground the historical consciousness of the public. Mani's body and appearance as a hero could be located within this allegory of visibility. His characters (and thus images) are formed within the realm of specific power relations in which visual imaginary reconnects with culturally conditioned images of the past that invite specific ways of seeing. When Mani started acting as a hero, he had to satisfy the dominant form of the historically constituted visual sensibility within which his appearance is nothing but a subaltern or a dalit body, to support the spectator's scopophilia, involving social fantasies and an idealized but historically constructed notion of ethnic communities. Here, Mani becomes a 'historical actor'—whose persona and body reinforces subaltern pasts—within the domain of the 'historical spectator'. The consciousness of historical spectators is embedded within the recurrent dialectic of past, present and future, whereby 'prosthetic memory' of pasts plays a role in identifying the subaltern 'historical actor' (see Landsberg, 1995; Nichols, 1996). Visual perception

is a definite outcome of social positioning and historical consciousness of hierarchical social relations in which body and embodied subjectivities become a metaphor to perceive identity and meaning.

The histories of marginalized in India are also involved in cinematic representation and spectators' dominant visual perceptions. However, it cannot be argued that the subaltern or lower castes were excluded from the dominant perceptions of visuality (Parayil, 2009, 73). Instead, as Gyanendra Pandey points out, "the subaltern is a necessary presence, s/he cannot be wished or spirited away; and yet he or she cannot fully belong. S/he has to be the same—and yet different at the same time. Difference is not to be privileged, yet it must not be entirely denied" (2008, 280-81). There is always an effort to incorporate their world-views but always marked by their otherness within the social space, so that the subaltern functions within a schema of 'subordinated inclusion'. Mani's hero thus performs within this subordinated mode without encroaching upon the dominant spaces of the elite. He is engaging in these generic spaces with his half-naked body, mentally and physically differently enabled situation, as well as with the fight to survive, offering a scornful laugh and fatal cry to negotiate with the historical consciousness of the spectator and with their identification of an ideal hero.

It can be stated that the way caste identification works in Malayalam films in general, and Mani's films in particular, involves distinctive symbolic languages, derived from the restricted social relations of past time and refashioned by modernity. However, the argument here is not that caste signifiers are functioning according to the pre-modern social pretext. Instead, these signifiers are reworked within contemporary cultural memory and expressed within the Malayalam film industry in order to gratify the visual perception of the viewer. Caste in Malayalam cinema, therefore, is articulated in a series of inherent, sometimes invisible, signs that articulate social divisions within both historical and contemporary spaces. I contend that there is thus continuity within the representation of type-caste through the use of bodily indexes and allied comedy, imitation, mockery, and humiliation as visual signifiers of caste, which in turn represent an unacknowledged manifestation of the social order based on hierarchy.

The persistence of subordinated visual space, articulation of signs through physiognomy, bodily gestures, language, and mimesis, and the spectator's identification of difference creates a space for Mani as an actor and important cultural figure that recognizes him as both a dalit actor and as a subaltern citizen. His naked body and the figurative wounds upon it become a spectacular commodity. The humiliation and the mental and moral pain therefore function as a pleasurable commodity to satisfy the viewers' perception. These historical signs help to invoke the spectator's collective and prosthetic memory in which caste functions as a sign to articulate marginality and inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> In postcolonial discourse, "subaltern" refers to a social group or class who is politically, economically and socially marginalized from all spheres of life and is located beyond the hegemonic structure of the society (Guha, 1982). This perspective helps to reformulate the historical understanding about India, its specific configuration of power, the uneven historical transition of social relations and the development of class contradictions (Chakrabarty, 2000). As a concept, it also reinstates marginalized population into the forefront of history to discuss political consciousness, autonomy, and dependence of the group as well as to enunciate the politics of representation (Das, 1989). Postcolonial theorists often use subaltern as a useful category to think through both the implicit and explicit articulations of racial/caste/gender stereotypes and their representations (see Mayaram, Pandian and Skaria, 2005; Pandey, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The term "dalit" was initially used to refer to all the oppressed including untouchables and outcastes, or those who exist below the entire caste system. However, it later acquired the meaning it now has, as the identity of the untouchable castes. Within the age-old caste hierarchical order in India, which is based upon 'varnas' (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysyas and Shudras), dalits were known as untouchables because their presence was considered to be so polluting—either by presence or by touch—that contact with them was to be avoided. Today, dalit is being reappropriated as a democratic description for the socially oppressed untouchable caste group by members themselves, in their fight to overcome historical injustices and gain equality and respect denied for them (See Webster 2001; Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Parallel to the Hindi/Mumbai (Bollywood) film industry are regional film industries in South India, which mainly consists of the Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam film industries. Though the history of Malayalam cinema begins in 1928, it is only after 1950 that Malayalam cinema made its overwhelming presence in the national industry. For decades, the Malayalam film industry was intertwined with the Hindi, Telugu and, in particular, Tamil film industries, which stressed themes of nationalism, mythology and so on. Despite the industry's slow development earlier on, today Malayalam films have achieved a higher degree of appreciation at the national and international film circuits, playing in art, commercial, and middle class or social cinemas. Malayalam film industry has many conflicting, competing and overlapping narratives, especially in regard to the division between commercial films and art cinema. Registers of middle class nostalgia and feudal past, ideological/social discontent or political unrest, and economic ills are some of the themes that found expression in varying degrees in Malayalam films through the years (Pillay, 1985; Swart, 2011; Joseph, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Mimicry is a genre of popular performance, which includes voice and sound imitation of human and non-human beings and entities. In its early phase, it was performed by individual artists and later it became a team performance known as 'Mimics Parade' or 'Comedy Shows'. Mimicry troops and artists have used various performative techniques such as theatre, mime and cinematic plot to produce effective satirical comedy on the various happenings in society. One of the prominent forms of mimicry performance is the imitation of voices, body features and gestures of celebrity actors, political leaders and other prominent figures in society, and it also featured with making satirical parody of significant political and social events. Many mimicry artists have entered the Malayalam film industry and established their career as popular film actors in South India. Mimicry artists turned film actors like Suraj Venjaramoodu and Salim Kumar have recently won the most prestigious national award for best actor for their performances in the films *Perariyathavar* (2013) and *Adaminte Makan Abu* (2010) respectively. Kalabhavan Mani received special jury awards (both national and state level) for his performance in *Vasantiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum* (1999).

<sup>5</sup> In the South Indian film industries, megastar, superstar and popular star are the usual terms to refer the very popular actors. The terms refer to actors' stardom as well as their capability of an actor to make films a box office hit. In the Malayalam film industry, Mammooty is known as a megastar, Mohanlal as superstar, and Jayaram and Dilip as popular stars.

<sup>6</sup> In December 2013, there was another complaint lodged against Kalabhavan Mani for alleged misbehavior towards customs officials at Cochin International Airport. Later, he was summoned and fined Rs.7000 for carrying undeclared gold (after failing to declare a gold bangle he wore during a foreign trip in November). When interviewed about the incident, Mani claimed that he had been harassed by customs and the police for quite some time because of existing racial and caste prejudices.

<sup>7</sup> The term toddy-tapper usually refers to a person who specializes in tree climbing to collect the sap from the bark of the coconut/palm trees. Toddy is a liquor or beverage fermented from this sap. From the colonial anthropological classification to the present identification of caste, the occupational status becomes a decisive criterion to define the caste identity of different communities in India. Similarly, toddy tapping became the typical occupation to identify lower

castes such as Ezhavas and Tiyans in Kerala. This classification based on occupation is also coded with racial and caste signifiers.

<sup>8</sup> See “Exclusive Interview Kalabhavan Mani in Bachelor Party”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnIn0NV31yk>

<sup>9</sup> In general, there are many parameters that define the domain of cultural identity of the Malayali. Language, food, sartorial practice, ethnic culture and public festivals are some of the projected denominators, which commonly constitute the ‘inner and outer’ self of Malayali’s cultural identity. Historically, this projected cultural identity was an inseparable product of the linguistic nationalism based on Malayalam language, which became one of the factors to the formation of Kerala state in 1956. However, within the domain of popular visual culture, the symbols and metaphors used to refer to this cultural identity are always attached to the upper caste section of the society. Their food practices, dress style and festivals are always incorporated as the dominant cultural identity of the Malayali. As such, existing caste divisions, distinct religious practices, minority cultures, and multiple regional dialects all offer critiques of this privileged cultural identity.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, when watching a film or a television program, people may have a memory of the narrative events that transpired without actually having experienced those events in any manner (see Landsberg, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> The recognition of the significant ‘other’ with differences and its ambivalence are some of the major tropes in postcolonial debates. Homi Bhabha describes this ambivalent denial and recognition of racial difference as ‘colonial mimicry,’ which he defines as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 86).

<sup>12</sup> Mani has sung folksongs in most of the films he has acted in, including *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum*, *Karumadikuttan*, *The Guard*, and *Bamboo Boys*.

<sup>13</sup> Bullying associated with physiognomic or bodily signs, skin colour, and the lower class origins of the comedian is a common form of visual narrative in South Indian Cinema (Srinivas Ravi .K and Sundar Kaali, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> History here refers to the social norms, cultural practices, events and phenomena that constitute the larger field of ‘cultural history’. In the context of cinema, it is this cultural history, specific historical events or social phenomena that would help the culturally specific audience to unpack the cultural connotations attributed to the subaltern identity presented onscreen.

<sup>15</sup> According to Madhava Prasad, a hero with political representation is a mass hero and a hero with economic and cultural representation is a class hero (Prasad 2009, 69). In these categories, Mani’s hero belongs to the second one.

<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that the lower castes, especially, dalits and untouchables, articulate a new self that was invented and formulated in the course of their engagement with colonial modernity. Eventually, the agency of lower castes engage with the traditional power structure and articulate claims on social spaces as well as the actual physical space that were generally closed to them (Mohan, 2006, 130). The discourse of ‘colonial modernity’ problematized caste and gender domination, including various aspects of everyday life that evolved out of the peculiar contradictions of power in the traditional society. These trends have led to the rise of new habits within the cultural fields of clothing, food, conjugal relations, and have simultaneously created a gendered space within public and private domains. However, the

effective histories of modernity were not a unique one and it created different mentalities, even in the same historical period and for the same people (Chatterjee, 2011, 170).

<sup>17</sup> This unequal 'visual economy' is not a result of modernity. As Partha Chatterjee has emphasized "this phenomenon (of modernity) cannot be understood as uneven development, because it is not simply a problem of different time lags or uneven dispersion over spaces. It becomes necessary to suspend the totalizing structural contrasts between the modern and premodern and focus instead on localized, contingent and often transient changes in actual practices" (2011, 170).

<sup>18</sup> D. R. Nagaraj argues that the Indian film public has a multiplicity of masks; a conservative viewer who defends private morality and family values might prove to be a passionate radical in the cinema hall, endorsing the collapse of the same tradition (Nagaraj; 2006, 114).

<sup>19</sup> Bill Nichols points out that "it is the ceaseless dialectic of past, present and future that sustains historical consciousness for the historical actor as well as the historical spectator" (Nichols, 1996, 56).

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